

Changing Sudan by telling the truth

By Gerhard Wilts, Nederlands Dagblad

Atrocities in Sudan do not cause uproar in the world. The media ignores this immense country. That infuriates Free Press Unlimited director Leon Willems, who fights for freedom of expression in Sudan: "The heart of this African country can only continue to beat if the truth is being told." One of the few places where the truth about Sudanese current affairs is being told is from a studio in the Dutch capital Amsterdam.

"Since its independence in 1956 Sudan has been worn down by a grinding power struggle," says Willems. For a large part of his working life Willems traveled as a journalist in Africa and the Middle East. He spent several years living in Khartoum, where he fell in love with Sudan. "I still feel homesick almost every day. The country is so fascinating! And the hospitality of the Sudanese is unimaginable."

Despite that welcoming spirit from the Sudanese, reports from Sudan continue to be depressing: revolts, violence, murder, ethnic struggle and a seemingly endless stream of refugees. From Darfur in the West to the Nuba mountains in the South, from the oil rich and therefore most contested border region of Abyei to the capital Khartoum, unrest is brewing.

Millions of Sudanese are adrift, on the run, exploited, starving or dead. The regime rules with an iron fist and has perfected a sophisticated divide and rule policy. Those in power do not successfully subdue the rebels - but the question is whether they truly aim for that.

Western news desks show hardly any interest in Sudan. "Nobody is interested and that has a lot to do with bias from Western journalists. I personally think there is a demand in the Western world for news from Sudan that is done properly and of high standards.", says Willems. According to Willems, Sudan is not an interesting story because of the 'self-enteredness' of some Western media and because of fixation on hype, such as the daily tweets of President Trump. According to him, the focus in Europe is too much on immigration, on safety and on terrorism. There is hardly any attention for Latin America or Africa, let alone Sudan. "The reality is: the beating heart of Sub Saharan Africa is Sudan."

To understand this one simply needs to look at a map, explains Willems. Until 2011, Sudan had nine neighboring countries and it is a giant among nations. It has become linked with armed conflicts in the region and is a hide-away for militias, nomads and terrorists. Bin Laden chose to live in Juba, in South Sudan.

The impact of Sudan on the region has been underestimated by the West, which views the country as poor and believes the African desert nation is backward, hopeless and in need of aid. "They do not see the influence Sudan has. They forget that the Sudanese are proud people and aware of their crucial role in this part of the world", according to Willems. This misunderstanding plays directly into the hands of the ruling elite in Khartoum; its dictator Omar al-Bashir has made use of it for decades.

Despite sanctions and the occasional political condemnation from abroad, the brutal and corrupt regime in Sudan is firmly in power. "Punishing Sudan is a senseless strategy," wrote American diplomat Zach Vertin at the end of January 2017, in the authoritative magazine *Foreign Affairs*. He stressed that cooperation with a such a regime could have more positive effects. "Punishing a terrible regime may appeal to our morals, but we should be aware of the consequences. Support for the Sudanese population should be the most important goal."

The one-sided American sanctions against Sudan at the end of the nineties sent Khartoum into the arms of the Chinese and mainly affected the already plagued impoverished population. Bashir in the meantime manages to stay out of the International Criminal Court, which issued a warrant for his arrest. For a quarter of a century he has effectively manipulated his way through politics; he meddles in tribal relations and moves armies and militias as though on a chessboard. He continuously changes individuals in his government. In the meantime in Khartoum wealth is divided among Bashir's loyal National Congress Party members. Sudan Democracy First Group, an organization striving for democracy in the country, has investigated Bashir's 'proxy wars: a tactic of waging war without being directly involved. Towards this end Bashir used the Rapid Support Forces - a militia from Darfur - in May last year to fight against tribes in the Blue Nile province. It was an attempt to repeat the Darfur model of genocide and mass murder in this part of the country – and it partly succeeded.

Similarly the governing NCP assisted the infamous Maban Heroes Militia and the so-called South Sudanese White Army in terrorizing the Sudanese fleeing to refugee camps in South Sudan. These militias, trained by the Sudanese army, cause insecurity and instability in the now independent country South Sudan."Militarily, this serves two purposes: creating a general environment of confusion and uncertainty within the refugee camps, and distracting the Northern rebel army, the SPLA-N," concludes Sudan Democracy First.

"The lack of respect for human lives is without limits," adds Willems. "The political elite sacrifices civilians as though they mean nothing; it sends children to war just to stay in power themselves. All power is concentrated in Khartoum, the population of the countryside is not valued, and nobody is interested in the potential of the country. To reach their goals those in power patiently and consistently obstruct foreign missions. The frustration at the United Nations about the level of this obstruction is sky-high."

That Bashir is still in power after all these years surprises Willems. "Finally the Sudanese themselves will put an end to it", he predicts. But he admits that prospects for short term change are far off. The Sudanese president is 73 years old. But on the African continent ageing dictators written off long ago are still in power, such as Robert Mugabe (93) in Zimbabwe or Jose Eduardo Dos Santos (74) from Angola.

According to Willems, military intervention is not the answer. Instead he prefers to focus on independent and reliable news that will open the eyes of the Sudanese. The road ahead will be difficult, as Sudanese press is consistently under pressure. "They are threatened or imprisoned for a while, but there are no executions. The media is like a pressure valve that helps the population to let off steam." The independent news station Radio Dabanga is a jewel in the crown of Free Press Unlimited's projects. The short-wave radio station is a thorn in the side of the Sudanese regime. The Amsterdam-based channel has a daily following of around two million Sudanese. It also has a satellite channel which continuously shows a news ticker and informative slides and which is still being watched on a daily basis by a million loyal 'viewers'. "The daily reports of Radio Dabanga have so much influence on the opinion of the people that the regime considers it subversive and dangerous to the state. But since Radio Dabanga broadcasts from abroad, the Sudanese government cannot control it."

Radio Dabanga, with a staff of fifteen, does not receive much national or international acclaim. "Many press agencies use Radio Dabanga for their coverage on Sudan, because it is a reliable news source, but it hardly gets the credits for it. Moreover, due to the

insecurity in the country there is a serious lack of footage available. This is, however, changing – due to the influence of social media and smartphones.

Despite that, hardly anybody in the Western world is interested in news from Sudan. And in the meantime the injustice continues.” This article has been taken from an interview published in the ‘Nederlands Dagblad’.

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